

People - Bittinger

CHARLES BITTINGER

By Gershon Bradford

He has taken his departure. Not really, for he has left a trail of pleasantries in a thousand minds. It is a pity that one who could brighten a dark hour should pass along. Yet 91 years is a comprehensive span of accomplishment.

MIT directed his mind to science; Paris led him deep into art. He interplayed these gifts with happy results; he became a member of the National Academy, a captain in the Naval Reserve; there were many honors, medals, exhibitions, pictures in well known galleries, topped by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. As an example of his meticulous style, examine, if available, the background detail of the portrait of President Gilbert Grosvenor in the National Geographic magazine of October 1966.

In 1914 Charles and Edith Bittinger acquired the stately Moore house on Tremont St., which continued to be their home for 56 years. Charles soon brought it to public attention with his striking painting, which he called "Duxbury 100" (the telephone number).

Their pleasant life in Duxbury changed abruptly in April 1917 when a naval officer held a recruiting meeting in town. Charles, among others, marched up the salty trail, he to be sworn in as a second class machinist's mate. His appearance at art gatherings in his bluejacket's uniform was the source of much merriment. That was only the beginning.

The Navy was becoming concerned with the menace of submarines and camouflage defense was receiving close attention. During a conference of experts called to the Department, a scientist suggested that there was a specialist with light already in their service. Charles was sent for. If you know the ways of the Navy, the astonishment will be understood when the scientist-bluejacket appeared. How simple it would have been to put two stripes and a star on his sleeve!

Shortly thereafter a celebrated scientist addressed the high ranks of the Department. Charles was standing in the rear when Secretary of the Navy Daniels arrived. Taking the bluejacket by the arm, he said, "Come on Bittinger," and up front they went. Admirals and captains raised their eyebrows.

There was more to come: an invitation for Charles Bittinger to dine at the White House. Until corrected we believe this is the only instance wherein an enlisted man dined with the President of the United States.

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He was shortly commissioned an ensign and sent to Eastman in Rochester. There he had the good fortune to work with one of our greatest experts with light.

Between wars he remained in the reserve, working up in naval rank. They were fruitful years, delving into the intricacies of science and art. With a phantom brush he executed some fantastic innovations with color. He would show you a painting of a white horse standing by a tree, hand you a red filter and on the same canvas, the horse was gone and seemingly by magic the portrait of a young lady would appear. A theatre curtain, painted by this genius, would show a summer scene which would become winter and the chorus girls' costumes would change by his trick with light. Perhaps his greatest triumph in this field were the murals he painted on the walls at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia. Normally they were invisible, but came out brilliantly when exposed to ultraviolet light. The work of his ingenious mind resulted in a score of patents.

During this period he had many brief tours of duty with the Navy. One of the most interesting was with the Navy Geographic Society's expedition to Canton Island in the Pacific. There, in 1937, he painted the corona at the total eclipse of the sun. This demanded incredibly fast work.

Called to active duty in World War II he found himself deeply involved in camouflage, becoming chief of that section. Notwithstanding that he was over 60, and with a heart attack five years earlier, he climbed to dizzy heights to study shades and tints under varying conditions; he went down in submarines and jumped to surging boats. Probably his most important contribution to the war was the development of the two-tone, gray, deceptive stripes running fore and aft with which all ships were painted.

At war's end, with the Legion of Merit, he returned to his beloved Duxbury 100 to spend 25 years of pleasure and useful activity.

The serenity of those years was broken by an interesting interlude. He accompanied the naval expedition to Bikini Island in the Pacific, where he again exercised his ability to paint an event of brief duration. The test explosion of the undersea atomic bomb was also a test of his talents, and his remarkable picture of this historic event received wide circulation.

HISTORY OF HIS HOUSE

His Duxbury house was built in 1807 with funds wrested from a harsh and demanding sea, but it was a peaceful harbor for Charles' retirement years. Set amidst Edith's profusion of flowers, its stern lines were softened by the beauty about it. Within its walls, a wealth of art delighted many eyes. Over that welcome threshold for 50 years there was a flow of guests: plain folks, celebrities of the art and science world, and, of course, the Navy from five stars down to the worthy gob. All have been exhilarated by the bubbling wit and depth of discussion. Their fund of knowledge they dispensed gently, of their friendly hospitality, they gave generously.

Those two admirable souls have taken flight. Their friends are left bereft. Taps have sounded for Duxbury 100.